Over the Waves

I don’t suppose anybody’s listening, but it strikes me as a bit of a drag that the CBC radio does not very often use old time Canadian music for incidental music -- stings and the like. I listen to As It Happens a lot, and one evening I was wondering why I get edgy at all the little fillers they use, dead-on imitations of Robert Johnson slide guitar licks, even Cajun accordion riffs, along with the usual studio-rock-schlock, and whatever. Some of it sounds real good. But then it struck me -- there’s no reason why it couldn’t be ten bars of Quebecois fiddle or Newfie accordion or prairie cymbaly.... It’s not like there aren’t players who could do it -- it’s not like Vacuumland is just full of folks sitting out there identifying the tag from "Terraplane Blues" and getting off on it.

I’m sure that that guitarist is Canadian, and I’m sure that the jazz players and violinists that play those stings are (mostly) Canadians, too. I’m glad they’re getting the work. It’s just that they could just decide to be a little more reflective of this particular country. But they won’t. Most of the people who produce radio are real hip -- to what was a new thrill two to three decades ago.... G.W.L.

The Centrefold

The Lead Belly Newsletter comes from The Lead Belly Society. P.O. Box 6679, Ithaca, New York, U.S.A. 14851 (Canadian subscriptions: $17.50 U.S. for one year, four issues). Obviously, it deals with the life and work of the great twelve-string maestro, blues singer and songster. It tends to feature brief encomiums to and bits of interesting (and not-so-interesting) data about Leadbelly. Issues run about -- pages and come out more or less quarterly. I’d probably be happier with more substantial articles, even if it meant they could only run one or two per issue -- in fact, I’m probably going to let my subscription lapse for just this reason. Still, it is a friendly little read, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it developed into something heavier with time.

While I’m at it, I’d like to take advantage of the informality of this column to use it to gripe about something that appeared in a recent issue. In a column devoted to comments on Leadbelly’s guitar by various luminaries, George Gruhn made this comment: "Lead Belly was not a fancy player but what he did, he did superbly well for he made every note count. He wasn’t really a flashy player; he was an accompanist rather than strictly an instrumentalist."

I get really tired of that kind of shortsightedness. One of the problems with comments on "quality" of musicianship is that so much depends upon which qualities determine quality. I don’t know of any guitarist who developed as personal and as unmistakable a style as did Leadbelly. He could play very fast, though perhaps not as fast as some who’ve had the advantage of classical training, scales and all that -- or who haven’t had their hands beaten by hard work. But there are a lot of players who couldn’t keep up with him.

What’s more important than Leadbelly’s status as a fastfingered chopsman is the fact that he developed an approach to the twelve-string guitar that was both uniquely expressive of himself as a musical personality and of the instrument’s potential.

Print junkies might want to check up on the various newsletters published by a handful of folk clubs and festivals around the country. In some cases, these will be of interest to local yokels and print junkies only; I doubt that many people in Halifax or Hull are gonna be real interested in such details as the price of knife/fork rental for the Vancouver Spring Shindig ($201.55). That datum was the hook on a recent editorial of the Three Quarter Times: The